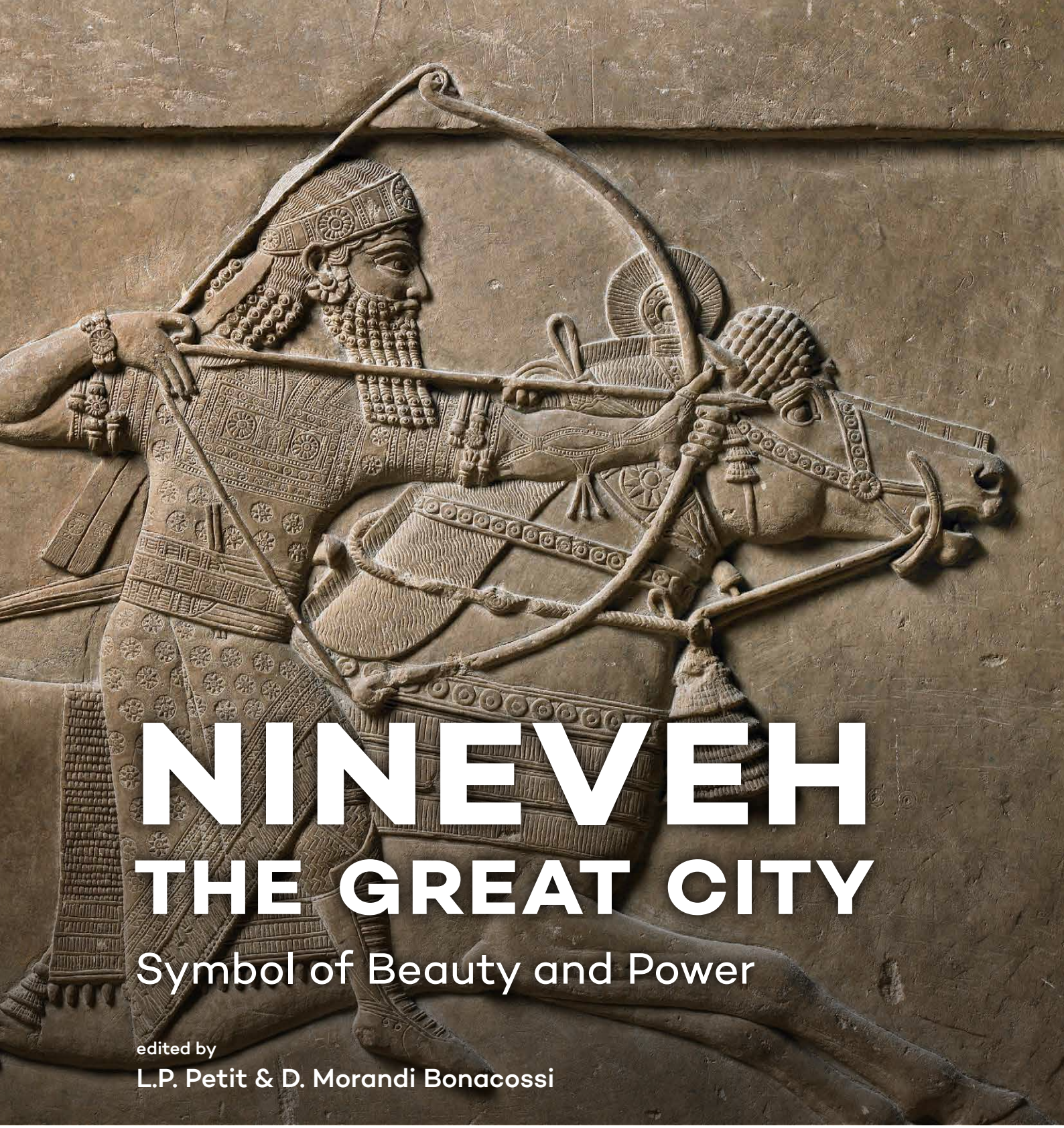

NINEVEH
THE GREAT CITY
Symbol of Beauty and Power

edited by
L.P. Petit & D. Morandi Bonacossi

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Detail of a relief showing King Ashurbanipal on a horse. Nineveh, Iraq; N Palace, Room S; 645–635 BC; gypsum; H 165.1 cm, W 116.8 cm; British Museum, London (1856,0909.48/BM 124874). © The Trustees of the British Museum.

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35. Sennacherib

Carlo Lippolis

Long before the palaces of Nineveh were brought back to light and their inscriptions deciphered, Sennacherib (reigned 705/704-681 BC; fig. 35.1) was already well known, due to a passage from Herodotus (II, 141) and, even more so, from the tale of the siege of Jerusalem told in the Bible (2 Kings 19-20; Isaiah 36-39).

At that time, the Assyrian Empire had already reached its apex and Sennacherib found himself, as the heir to the throne, carrying out heavy institutional and coordinating duties in Nimrud (ancient Kalhu), Nineveh and, in particular, in his father's capital, Khorsabad (ancient Dur-Šarrukin). Of the skills the young Sennacherib was to acquire, it was his technical legacy that would draw the highest praise in successive royal inscriptions.

Ascending the throne after the sudden demise of his father, Sargon II (reigned 721-705 BC, fig. 27.1), while fighting in Anatolia in 705 BC, Sennacherib immediately took distance from his predecessor's policies. His father's unheard-of fate (his body was never retrieved, meaning that he was not buried in his homeland, a serious issue according to Mesopotamian beliefs) was felt to be a divine punishment and a negative omen: hence not only the decision to avoid all mention of Sargon's name in his own royal inscriptions, but also to move the capital from Khorsabad to Nineveh, an ancient religious, political and economic centre, not to mention a crossroads between two important communication axes, those between Northern and Southern Mesopotamia, and between the Zagros mountains and the Syrian Euphrates.

It was here that he had his new residence erected, named the 'palace without a rival', with the phases of its construction duly noted in royal texts (fig. 35.2; Kertai, this volume). The palace was adorned with cycles of panels carved in bas-relief illustrating Sennacherib's military enterprises, for a total length of more than 3 km. The scenes were set in an omnipresent and realistic landscape, the outcome of a new, original 'far away' point of view elaborated by Nineveh's artists. His enterprises as a builder were also celebrated, however, such as the extraction of a monolith from a quarry and the transportation of one of the man-headed bull colossi (weighing several tons) to Nineveh (fig. 35.3). The city's rebuilding under Sennacherib had not only planned for its edifices to be taller, bigger and with deeper foundations than the previous ones (a widespread stereotype in all royal inscriptions), but also for its roads to be straight, its squares wider, all buildings to be artistically finished, their materials to be polished and shiny: here, the idea of a cosmic, ordered town affirming itself over the preceding chaos is manifest.

The whole city was thus enormously expanded, to the point of reaching 750 ha; eighteen monumental city gates now opened in the new double walls (Ur, this volume). The fortifications, surrounded by a moat, consisted of external walls in blocks of limestone, and inner, taller (reaching 25 m) walls of sun-dried brick, rising on stone foundations (fig. 35.4). The internal citadel itself, Kuyunjik, where the palace and the main temples stood, was protected by walls with a main east entrance (the so called 'entrance for the inspection of the people').

Not just the defensive system, but also the street grid, the whole building plan of the lower city (not very well known from an archaeological point of view), the water

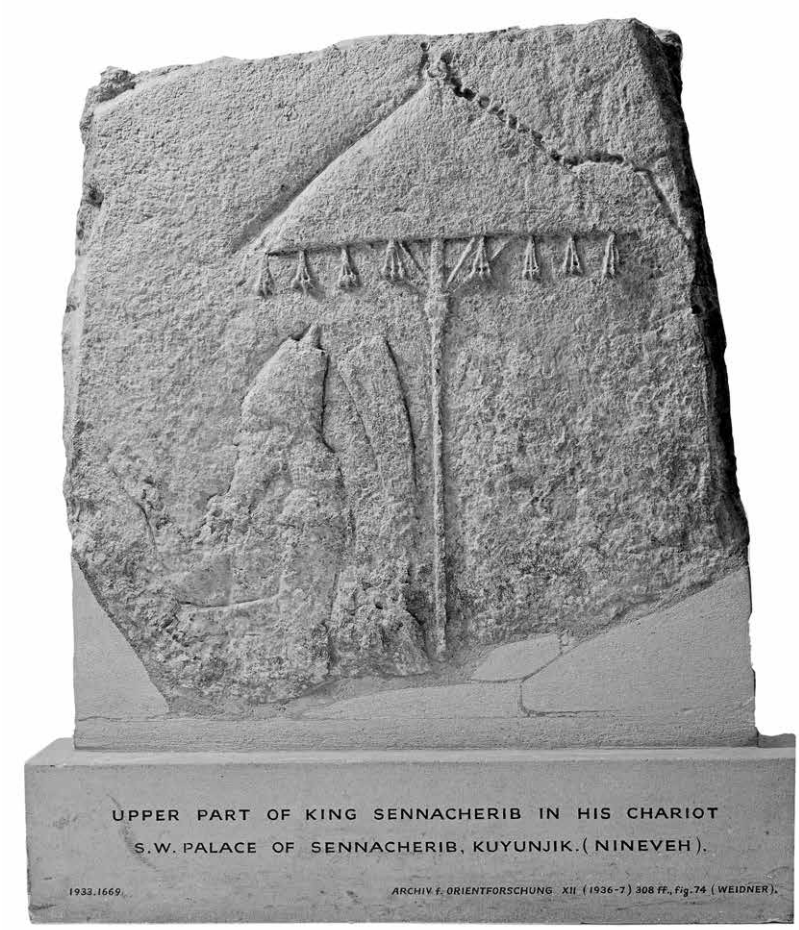

Figure 35.1 Relief showing king Sennacherib under a sunshade. Nineveh, Iraq; Gallery XLIX (O), SW Palace; 7th century BC; gypsum; H 53 cm, W 55.8 cm; Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (AN 1933.1669). © Ashmolean Museum.

supply and the irrigation system of the city were completely reorganized. Sennacherib transformed Nineveh in a splendid metropolis, whose reflection we can still perceive today from its archaeological remains, from the magnificent palace bas-reliefs and the royal inscriptions.

If the Assur monarchs had previously constructed hydraulic structures and canals, Sennacherib's hydraulic engineering feats remain marvels to this day (Morandi Bonacossi, this volume). Huge quantities of water were required to satisfy the needs of the new great capitals: for the agricultural hinterland, for gardens and parks, and for their inhabitants. In Nineveh, the water from the mountains to the north and northeast of the city was regimented and channelled via canal systems, underground tunnels, sluices and aqueducts, while artificial embankments and alluvial plains were created to protect the capital against sudden floods or overflows (fig. 35.5).

As regards his military campaigns, the siege of Jerusalem in 701 BC (celebrated in texts but actually a failure) and the siege of Lachish (depicted on the entirety of the walls of Hall XXXVI of the palace; Ussishkin, this volume) are famous. Many campaigns were conducted in Babylonia, relations with which had long been problematic. Babylon was the main religious and cultural centre of the whole of Mesopotamia, and thus could not be treated as a normal province of the empire. The picture was further complicated by the complex social and ethnic puzzle that was the southern region of the Land of Two Rivers. Sennacherib conducted many military campaigns against the then Babylonian sovereign Marduk-apla-iddina II (reigned 722-710 BC and 703-702 BC), who sought refuge in nearby Elam, an ally at that time, from which he would continue to carry out an anti-Assyrian policy. In any case, the Babylonian political situation remained

Figure 35.2 Clay cylinder containing a foundation record of Sennacherib's palace. Nineveh, Iraq; 704-681 BC; clay; H 23.5 cm, W 13.5 cm; British Museum, London (1915,0410.1/BM 113203). © The Trustees of the British Museum.

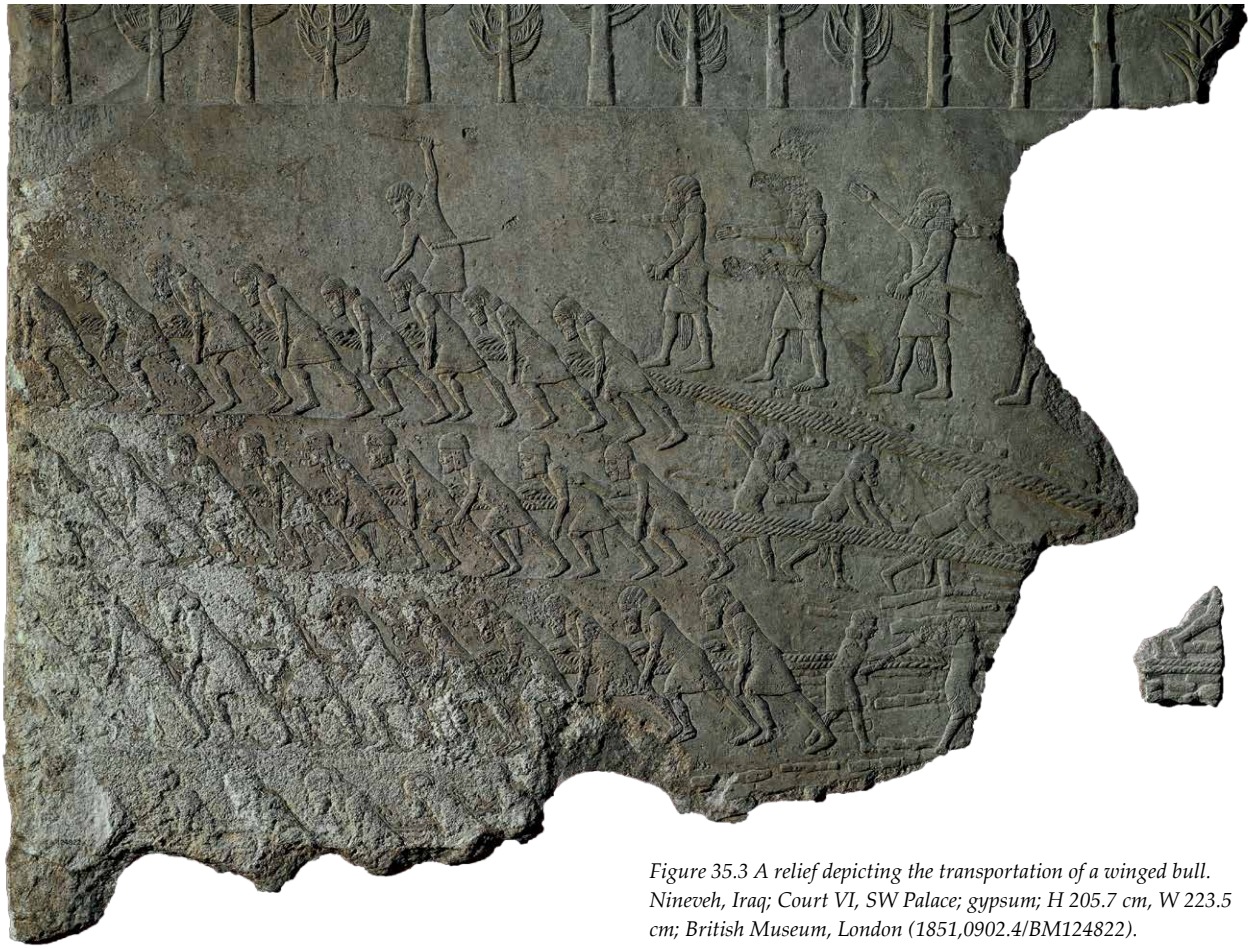

Figure 35.3 A relief depicting the transportation of a winged bull. Nineveh, Iraq; Court VI, SW Palace; gypsum; H 205.7 cm, W 223.5 cm; British Museum, London (1851,0902.4/BM124822). © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Figure 35.4 The Nergal Gate and reconstructed walls of Nineveh, November 2008. Photograph by JoAnn S. Makinano/ Wikimedia Commons.

uncertain and tense, climaxing in the murder of Sennacherib's son, Ashur-nadin-šumi, who had been placed by the former on the throne of Babylon. The Assyrian response did not enjoy immediate success, and it was only in 689 BC that Sennacherib managed to capture Babylon, this time treating the city particularly harshly. According to what he himself reported in his inscriptions, the city was destroyed and partially dissolved in the diverted waters of the Euphrates, and the statues of the main city divinities were deported to Assyria. An act of wilful and total destruction that, perpetrated against an ancient religious centre such as Babylon, was felt to be ungodly and sacrilegious by contemporaries. An act that was certainly not instinctive, but that was probably a deliberate political and religious strategy on Sennacherib's part, since he was also trying to transfer to Assyria the cultural and religious primacy for central Southern Mesopotamia. Sennacherib was to die in 681 BC in a court conspiracy in one of the temples in Nineveh, having designated his youngest son Esarhaddon (reigned 681-669 BC) as his successor.

Figure 35.5 Four different technical components of the Assyrian hydraulic system: canal stretch chiselled through natural bedrock in Khinis (A), tunnel at Shiru Maliktha (B), canal stretch dug into the earth at Bandawai (C) and aqueduct in Jerwan (D). Courtesy of Daniele Morandi Bonacossi, Land of Nineveh Archaeological Project.

Figure 35.6 Relief depicting an Assyrian soldier holding a mace. Nineveh, Iraq; 7th century BC; limestone; H 18 cm, W 18 cm; Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (AN 1940.202). © Ashmolean Museum.